AN INVESTIGATION OF COOPERATIVE GROUP PLANNING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

BY

LOIS VIVIAN JOHNSON

B. Ed., Northern Illinois State Teachers College, 1938

A. M., Northwestern University, 1939

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

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The need of intelligent cooperation in the world today is a truism. The children of today will be the adults in a world in which the ability and desire to think and act cooperatively will be indispensible. Fundamentally conceived, cooperative group endeavor contributes both to society and to the individual. It has social and psychological values for the growing child.

Cooperation is a quality of the social process of group planning. The quality of the interaction between individuals in the group influences the level of cooperative thought and action.

As a quality of thought and action, cooperation tends to produce more satisfying achievement and to affect concomitant feelings. It is a quality of individual or group action which seeks to take into consideration the effects and meanings of that action in its wider consequences.

Cooperation so conceived is inherent in the democratic ideal of a way of life which considers the welfare of individuals.

This study analyzes the characteristics, techniques, and values of cooperative group planning in the elementary school as they actually exist in selected school situations. The investigation was made in order (1) to determine what the characteristics of planning periods are in actual practice, (2) to determine the extent to which such characteristics are in accord with the theory expressed in the literature of the field, and (3) to determine what values in planning are seen by teachers, children, and the investigator.

An analysis of the process of cooperative group planning

was made. The outstanding leaders in the field of educational theory have stated in the literature dealing with planning their concepts of the characteristics of group planning[1]. The distinguishing characteristics of cooperative group planning as revealed by the literature of the field include:

1. Goals that are of interest and concern to the group.
2. Group thinking in which there is free and accurate interchange of ideas.
3. Understanding and agreement which is developed through group discussion and thinking.

[1] The following references furnished a large part of the content of the analysis of the characteristics of group planning:

Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development, National Education Association. *Group Planning in Education.* Washington, D. C.: The Association, 1945.

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Mayfarth, Frances. "A Bridge to Cross," *Childhood Education* XXI (May, 1945) : 435.

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Miel, Alice. "Learning to Plan Together," *Teachers College Record* XLVIII (March, 1947) : 391-402.

Watson, Goodwin. "What Are the Effects of a Democratic Atmosphere on Children?" *Progressive Education* XVII (May, 1940) : 336-342.

4. Specific and effective decisions reached through group discussion.
5. Leadership that is functional and democratic.
6. Respect for individuals and their uniqueness.
7. Flexibility and variability in the thing planned and in the form of planning.

If these characteristics of cooperative group plannings are implemented, the resulting learnings will be in accord with and further the objectives of education for democratic living. These resulting educational values should be apparent in changed behavior, attitude, knowledge, and skills as follows:

1. If goals are of interest and concern to the group, individuals will be challenged and stimulated to work for ends that transcend personal gain and that are important to the social group.
2. If there is free and accurate interchange of ideas in the process of group thinking, individuals will become known to one another and friendships will develop, and better solutions will emerge than would appear if individuals were working alone.
3. If understanding agreement is developed through group discussion and thinking, there will be impetus and desire on the part of individuals to work and to achieve.
4. If specific and effective decisions are reached through group discussion, efficiency will be promoted and feelings of responsibility will be encouraged.
5. If leadership is functional and democratic, the sources of knowledge which contribute to the group welfare will be utilized, individuals will develop power, and feel satisfaction through participating at the times when they can assume the role of leader.
6. If there is respect for individuals and their uniqueness, children will gain an understanding awareness of individual differences, they will gain security and status through many avenues and abilities, and the

learning atmosphere will be friendly and accepting.

7. If there is flexibility in the thing planned and in the form of the planning, groups will be stimulated to approach and work at their problems creatively, using their personal and immediate resources to advantage.

The Method and Findings

Cooperative planning periods were observed in eleven elementary school classes. Five observations were made of each teacher and class. Seven schools in four school systems were used and observations were made in grades one through six inclusive. Six of the schools were public schools, one was a college demonstration and training school.

The children in this study were those being taught by their regular teachers in their regular teaching assignments. The children were not selected nor specially trained. There appeared to be only the expected differencs in chronological ag which accompany progress through the elementary school. There were small differences in intelligence quotients among the schools, with the exception of one grade which was noticeably lower than the other classes included in this study. Two schools had similar high economic status. The largest amount of retardation was found with the older children. There was a generally stable attendance in the schools the children were attending at the time of the investigation. These data give an impression of the normality of the groups.

The method of direct observation was used in securing the records of the planning periods. All observations were made and recorded in shorthand by the investigator. Questionnaires answered by the children and teachers were additional sources of data.

The problems discussed in the fifty-five planning periods were primarily drawn from subject-matter fields, with the social studies most frequently represented. The teachers

generally agreed on social studies, room arrangement, room management, plays, parties, programs, and games as the types of activities in which they used cooperative group planning.

The first and second grades mentioned several activities in their plans which occurred daily and were used as a reminder for the children. Above the second grade plans for the day were not made. In grades three through six the planning periods were devoted to one problem.

The teachers in this study used single planning periods and continuing periods according to the needs of the situation. Single periods in which there were recurring elements were found in the first and second grades.

Teachers adjusted the choices in their planning to the children, sometimes giving them choice of content, and, at other times, choice of procedure.

Responsibility for executing group plans was usually given to all individuals in the group, rather than to individuals or small groups. This was especially true of the first two grades. The older children delegated more responsibility to selected individuals and committees than did the younger groups.

Most of the problems for which the teacher and children developed plans were factual in nature. In one out of fifty-five planning periods a normative situation, involving conflicting values, was the subject of satisfactory planning.

The amount of time spent in planning tended to increase with the increasing age and maturity of the children.

The recorded lessons were analyzed to show the techniques used by the eleven cooperating teachers and excerpts were chosen from the recorded lessons which were illustrative of these techniques. All seven major characteristics of cooperative group planning were represented in the excerpts showing the teachers' techniques.

Excerpts from the recorded lessons showed that the teachers chose goals which were appropriate to the interests of the group and that the teachers helped children realize that the problems were of concern to them. The teachers attempted to stimulate free and accurate interchange of ideas. They felt a responsibility for children to understand the ideas and plans developed, as shown by their attention to definition and by the technique of asking children to explain, repeat, and re-state. Free sharing of ideas and attention to understanding helped promote a friendly atmosphere and better solutions to problems. The teachers tried to promote understanding and agreement through discussion so there would be a felt desire on the part of individuals and the group to work and to achieve. Some of the ways in which teachers worked toward agreement were the use of summaries, directing questions, and inter-child discussion. Efficiency in carrying out plans and feelings of responsibility on the part of children and the group were encouraged when group discussion produced clear-cut decisions. Techniques of securing group decisions included the use of voting, free discussion which arrived at consensus, and guiding questions and comments by the teacher. The teachers in this study assumed the role of leader, explained to children the teacher's responsibility as a leader, and utilized the leadership of children as they were able to assume it through their ideas and information. Encouraging children to act as leaders when they were able to do so promoted feelings of satisfaction and of membership in the group. Children and teachers showed respect for individuals and their abilities in various ways. Teachers frequently attempted to encourage quiet, shy children to participate by directly asking their opinions. There was general acceptance on the teachers' part of children's ideas, which made for good relationships. The best evidence of using and valuing varied abilities was seen in those cases where the scope of the problem permitted the greatest diversity. Flexibility in the things planned was shown in those instances

when children had a choice of the problems which they were to discuss and plan. Also, there was flexibility in the form of the planning as no teacher held to a rigid order or sequence of steps. The form varied from period to period with the same teacher and it varied from teacher to teacher.

A pupil evaluation sheet was constructed to secure individual reactions to particular aspects of planning. The evaluation sheets were constructed and administered with the objective of securing sincere and reasoned responses from the children. Each teacher administered the questionnaire to his class. Because of the reading and writing skills involved, the evaluation sheets were not used in the first and second grades, but they were completed by the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grades.

On the basis of the responses to this questionnaire, it seemed that most children like to participate in group planning through both talking and listening. The children were equally divided in thinking they participated enough and in thinking they participated too little. Very few children thought they participated too frequently in planning periods.

The majority of the children desired more frequent planning periods, and they thought their periods were of the right length or that they should be longer.

Most of the children understood the group-evolved decisions, so they know what would be the next step or action.

Half of the children felt they put forth their best effort as a result of sharing in the planning while an almost equal number felt they "sometimes" did their best work under such conditions.

The children preferred cooperatively-planned to teacher-planned work. This preference increased from grade to grade, with about ninety per cent of the sixth grade children

expressing a desire to share in planning.

The children who in the opinions of their peers had the best ideas and who talked too much were more clearly identified than children who talked too little. There were almost twice as many children named for talking too little as for talking too much.

The children were able to suggest suitable and reasonable topics which were related to their school life as problems for group discussion and planning.

In suggesting the essentials of good planning periods, the children's comments concerning attitudes were most frequent. The skills, behavior, and knowledge needed in planning were mentioned in decreasing order.

When naming the children in the group who contributed the best ideas in planning periods, one and, sometimes, two children were strongly chosen. These leaders tended to be near the top of their groups in intelligence, their school attendance had been stable, and they were named by their peers for talking "too much" in group planning periods.

Cooperative group planning was evaluated by the children, teachers, and the investigator from their different perspectives. On the basis of the children's evaluation sheets, spontaneous comments, desire to continue planning, and comments recorded by a teacher, it seems clear that the children in this study liked to plan cooperatively and found it a satisfying experience.

The written opinions of the cooperating teachers were secured with respect to the values which they saw in group planning. The values most frequently stated by the teachers were those which resulted from the free interchange and real communication of ideas. The values which accrue as the result of respecting individuals and their unique capabilities were frequently mentioned. Also high in frequency of occurrence was the importance of understanding and

agreement for their motivational power and for their employment of skills of thinking. In the opinions of these teachers who regularly planned with children, the children showed good attitudes toward cooperatively planned work and expended more than their usual effort on these activities. Children grew in their consideration and appreciation for others and in the quality of interpersonal relationships generally. In the opinions of some teachers, children's attitudes toward teacher-planned work were more understanding and accepting because of experiences with shared planning.

The teachers most often noted growth in their classes in the following three characteristics of cooperative group planning: participation, the ability freely and accurately to share ideas through discussion; greater ability and skill in making decisions; and in understanding and respect for individuals and their particular abilities and contributions.

The teachers' evaluations included their opinions of the difficulties and problems they saw in planning with children. There were two difficulties most frequently mentioned by the teachers. First, the attention to the personal growth and development of the individual, and, second, the use of children's contributions to discussion.

The evaluation by the investigator was concerned with the theoretical promise of cooperative group planning for practice and with aspects needing implementation. Shared planning could be used to advantage with problems of greater scope than the ones with which it has frequently been used in the elementary school. Problems should be of such scope that varied abilities and talents of individuals in the group may be used to enhance the group life.

Conclusions

Teachers found cooperative group planning an effective and educationally sound way of working with children.

Children showed desirable attitudes and responded enthusiastically to the challenge of participation and responsibility given in group planning experiences. The investigator found it a process of observed value, but of unfulfilled promise as a means to the development of individuals and a better life for all.

VITA

Lois Vivian Johnson was born in Beloit, Wisconsin, on January 5, 1913. She graduated from the Sycamore, Illinois, High School in 1930. She received her B. Ed. degree with high scholastic honors from Northern Illinois State Teachers College, DeKalb, Illinois, in 1938, and her M. A. degree from Northwestern University in 1939.

After one year as an interneship teacher at Glencoe, Illinois, in 1938-39, she taught at Wallace School, an elementary school in Des Moines, Iowa, from 1939 to 1942. From 1942 to 1945 she served as Supervisor of Sixth Grade and Instructor in Education at the Campus Elementary School, Eastern Illinois State Teachers College, Charleston, Illinois. She taught in the College of Education, University of Illinois, in 1945-46, and acted as Elementary Supervisor in Urbana, Illinois, during the fall of 1946. In 1947 she accepted a position as Assistant Professor in the Division of Education, Michigan State College, East Lansing, Michigan.

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